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6-9-2006

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THE CHRONICLE

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The Chronicle Review

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June 9, 2006

Taking Public Scholarship Seriously

By NANCY CANTOR and STEVEN D. LAVINE

Scholars and artists at colleges and universities are increasingly engaging in public scholarship. Leaving their campuses to collaborate with their communities, they explore such multidisciplinary issues as citizenship and patriotism, ethnicity and language, space and place, and the cultural dimensions of health and religion. They are creating innovative methods and vocabularies for scholarship using cutting-edge technology, pursuing novel kinds of creative work, and integrating research with adventurous new teaching strategies. But will those faculty members be promoted and rewarded at tenure time for their efforts?

Creative scholarship often involves complex projects carried out by teams of experts from both the campus and the community. Such projects may result in peer-reviewed articles in scholarly journals and new or revitalized teaching approaches, but may also yield outcomes as varied as policy recommendations for local governments, a collaborative museum exhibit, a radio documentary about a local issue, a new elementary-school or secondary-school curriculum, or a creative-writing workshop for inmates at a state prison.

Our own institutions, Syracuse University and the California Institute of the Arts, have had some notable successes in public scholarship. At Syracuse, the geography department collaborated with a local coalition on a project to "map" hunger. Faculty members and students worked with community agencies, food pantries, local government, and foundations to chart a complex topography that includes access to resources, the right to benefits, and the provision of emergency aid to needy residents. The mapping, made possible by the advent of geographic-information-systems technology, allows scholars and students to see hunger in new ways. For example, they can identify which food pantries are adequately stocked, and determine who is more vulnerable to hunger when neighborhood schools and school-based summer programs are closed or cut back.

At CalArts, under the umbrella of the Community Arts Partnership, students and faculty members work side by side with staff members at community art centers and public schools throughout the Los Angeles area to provide sustained arts education to underserved high-school and middle-school students. The project helps those students develop new understandings of the possibilities and places of art in American society.

Many other examples of public and creative scholarship can be found on campuses around the country. Yet while such community engagement is flourishing, the graduate students and faculty members who are fueling the trend are not. As undergraduates, they were the first generation to have broad access to community-service learning programs in college. In graduate school, they want to remain engaged, and, ultimately, they hope to bring into the professoriate their commitment to that interdisciplinary type of scholarship. But scholars who want to collaborate with diverse groups off their campuses are still pressured to defer community-based research and civic collaborations until they receive tenure. How many times have we heard, "You'd better wait until you get tenure before you do that"?

Today's system of tenure and promotion extracts a high price. It is costly to communities, as it deprives them of relationships with educational partners. It is costly to faculty artists and scholars who find it difficult to make their public and community-based intellectual and artistic work count at tenure time. And it is costly to students looking to the curriculum for opportunities for significant public work.

We higher-education leaders claim that we want creative scholars who are also committed to the public good. We brag about the fabulous work of our engaged faculty, whose ranks frequently include professors of color and women in underrepresented fields — just the kinds of scholars we'd like to attract and keep. But often that engagement is not what gets them promoted.

Surely the gap between praise and reward is not inevitable. To encourage top-notch scholarship that contributes to public purposes, and to attract and keep a diverse faculty, we should look hard at the culture of the academic workplace and reconsider what constitutes excellence at tenure time. We need to develop flexible but clear guidelines for recognizing and rewarding public scholarship and artistic production.

That is the basic purpose of a new national effort spearheaded by *Imagining America: Artists and Scholars in Public Life*, a consortium supported by 70-odd colleges and universities,

including Syracuse University and CalArts. Based at the University of Michigan, the consortium is establishing a "tenure team" to develop policies and processes that appropriately value public scholarship and engaged artistic creation in the cultural disciplines. As national co-chairs, we are pleased to provide leadership for that team.

We and the other members will tap many past and present efforts to rethink our current academic reward system: the late Ernest Boyer's work on multiple scholarships, including the "scholarship of engagement," and further research by the organization that he headed, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching; the Faculty Roles and Rewards program of the American Association for Higher Education; the vision of what it means when "a nation goes to college," spearheaded by the Association of American Colleges and Universities; and the Clearinghouse & National Review Board for the Scholarship of Engagement.

We were also encouraged to see that the Modern Language Association, at its annual convention last December, previewed a forthcoming report that signaled a move toward greater flexibility in the tenure-review process. Although we do not yet know what it will recommend, the final report is due out later this year and is expected to recommend that departments spell out at the time they hire faculty members, through negotiated agreements, what type of work will influence tenure decisions. We hope this kind of flexibility will lead to a more favorable environment for scholars pursuing public scholarship and creative work.

There are good reasons why national groups should deal with tenure as a public matter that is important to our culture. Colleges have the intellectual and artistic resources to make significant contributions to society. Policies that encourage the best of our young faculty members to undertake public scholarship can make alliances between colleges and other knowledge-creating institutions far more deliberate and useful.

Some campuses have already developed new policies and put them into place. Portland State University, for example, has agreed to accept the blurred boundaries between research, teaching, and engagement that are hallmarks of excellence in public scholarship. The university's policy notes, "It is more important to focus on the general criteria of the quality and significance of the work than to categorize the work." Guidelines at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign assert that faculty "involvement in public service may positively serve the purposes of their research and teaching."

Our working definition of public scholarship in the arts and humanities comprises research, scholarship, or creative activity that:

- connects directly to the work of specific public groups in specific contexts;
- arises from a faculty member's field of knowledge;As we move
- involves a cohesive series of activities contributing to the public welfare and resulting in "public good" products;
- is jointly planned and carried out by coequal partners; and toward
- integrates discovery, learning, and public engagement. ^a consensus on what

constitutes public scholarship, we are committed to developing criteria for the excellence of this work. We will listen hard to views about what a portfolio of public scholarship should look like as part of a tenure dossier for faculty members in the cultural disciplines.

We are also looking for a broader definition of "peer" in "peer review," to include recognized nonacademic leaders in public scholarship and public-art making. Capable reviewers may be found in museums, theaters, public education, nongovernmental organizations, and libraries, and growing numbers have national reputations for campus-community partnerships and for making public culture.

Perhaps most important, we are recommending that faculty members and evaluators not advise junior colleagues to postpone public scholarship if that is where their passions lie.

We must take public scholarship seriously and frame broader and more-flexible definitions of scholarship, research, and creative work. We must think boldly about what we define as knowledge, what we regard as interesting, and whom we call "scholars." The future demands it.

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<http://chronicle.com> Section: The Chronicle Review Volume 52, Issue 40, Page B20

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The Chronicle of Higher Education 1255 Twenty-Third St, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20037